DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 289 CS 216 618

AUTHOR vanLent, Peter
TITLE The Image of Higher Education in American Indian Popular Literature.
PUB DATE 1999-03-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Joint Meeting of the Popular Culture and American Culture Association (San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1999).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS American Indian Education; *American Indian Literature; *College Environment; Cultural Isolation; *Higher Education; *Novels; *Popular Culture; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS *College Image; Native Americans; Theme (Literary)

ABSTRACT

In their attempts to lead a dual-life experience, characters in popular literature written by and/or about Native American Indians occasionally enroll in institutions of higher education; like many of their real-life counterparts very few of these student characters find the experience to be a positive undertaking. This narrative pattern reflects a "tragic reality" in American higher education today. The paper deals with four novels which target specific problems encountered by Native American students in college, i.e.: "Wolfsong" (Louis Owen); "Turtle Belly" (Joel Monture); "First Eagle" (Tony Hillerman); and "Agoak" (Yves Theriault). Parallels can be drawn between reality and the negative image of higher education in American Indian popular literature, since the primary reasons for higher education's failure with Native Americans are outlined in the novels discussed: social maladjustment, disinterested faculty, irrelevant curriculum, lack of a support network, alienation from personal heritage, racism, etc. The paper suggests some ways to ameliorate the situation, such as establishing residence halls where a support community can be formed, hiring Native American counselors to facilitate positive peer communication, and organizing tutoring programs. Contains 6 references. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 429 289

THE IMAGE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICAN INDIAN POPULAR LITERATURE

Peter vanLent, PhD
Native American Studies
St. Lawrence University

In their attempts to lead a dual-life experience, characters in popular literature written by and/or about Native American Indians occasionally enroll in institutions of higher education. Like many of their real-life counterparts very few of these student characters find the experience to be a positive undertaking. The basic thesis of this paper is that this narrative pattern reflects a tragic reality in American higher education today. Normally, I am wary of drawing too close a parallel between literary situations and real life experience. What makes the "stuff" of good literature is very often not what we encounter in our everyday lives. In this case, however, literary fiction and social reality are closely aligned. The reasons why literary students are unhappy in their fictional college experience correspond to the reasons that real life American Indians have a low rate of success in higher education.

This paper will deal with four novels which target specific problems encountered by Native students in college.

Example 1. Louis Owen's novel Wolfsong.

In Wolfsong higher education does not create an undue amount of trauma in a young Native person's life, but it is hardly depicted as a positive experience. Within the mechanics of the plot, Tom Joseph's absence from his home community of Forks in the state of Washington to attend college at the University of California at Santa Barbara functions primarily as a literary device designed to provide for the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

structure of social and personal return. At the very beginning of the story Tom returns home from college for the funeral of his uncle who has died protesting the destruction of certain important land areas for a mine. Tom ends up by staying in his town of Forks and taking up the resistance effort of his dead uncle. Returning to college in California is never a very strong option for him. As he says in his own words: "I didn't fit in down there".[73] As he readjusts to being home, he thinks back to the contrasting experience of trying to adapt to American college life. There is little in these memories to draw him back to his studies. The pattern that emerges is that of a student with no successful socialization. He did not join any of the student activities and did not return his roommate's feelings of brotherhood.[18] Even with the environmentalist students with whom he should have shared a concern for nature, he felt alienated.[126] He was aware of certain spiritual forces in the land on which the campus was built, but none of the other students, even the Native ones, shared this.[64] In fact, he recalls that, while at college, he "never talked at all."[182] His one sexual encounter with a woman student whom he described as "L.A. beautiful" was based mainly on her exotic appeal. The sex had no meaning since it was with a "girl he didn't know."[160] Cynically, Tom concludes that a school like UC Santa Barbara is not really interested in minority students such as him, but accepts them and sustains them just to satisfy Affirmative Action requirements.

The only experience at Santa Barbara that has any lasting impact on Tom's life is the relationship with his roommate, McBride, who has a very strong Native American identity and heritage even though he is only one eighth American Indian. An enrolled Flathead raised in his culture, McBride is totally comfortable in both the Native world and the White world. At first McBride serves primarily as a character contrast to Tom in the flashbacks to college life. However, he goes on to become a major player in the plot when he visits Tom in Washington state after the funeral. McBride comes to understand the difficulties of Tom's life in his community and wisks him off to a traditional sweat with some of his own Native friends. The sweat and the persons he meets there do impress Tom and are a major confirmation of his desire to identify with his heritage. He owes this to McBride whom he met at college, but these events happen miles from the campus and have nothing to do with his academic experience. He could have met McBride in the Army, in a bar, anywhere... College ends up being for Tom a memory of a lonely, friendless period of time spent away from home.

Example 2: Joel Monture's new novel, Turtle Belly.

What can be described as asocial maladjustment to college in Wolfsong becomes blatant antisocial behavior in Joel Monture's new novel, Turtle Belly. The first part of this novel tells of the upbringing of a half-blood Mohawk boy, Sam Turtle Belly, by his mother's family on the

Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. Sam's artistic talent is noted early on and he is awarded an art scholarship to Dartmouth College. The second part of the novel is devoted to Sam's experiences at Dartmouth. While the major narrative focus is on his romantic/sexual relationship with a waitress-prostitute, the reader is given ample opportunity to witness the painfully negative interaction between student and college. Even before he arrives at Dartmouth Sam is in a defiant state of mind. He has heard enough about this "rich-boys'," snobby school to be quite sure that he doesn't "belong in a place like this." [189] Before even setting foot on campus, Sam is displaying resistive behavior. In his own words:

> And so I arrived at Dartmouth College--late for registration, drunk with a black eye, towing along a waitress named Judy in an unbuttoned pink uniform and a hair net. I told the admissions officer handing out packets with room keys that Judy was my sister. I don't think he believed me. I didn't give a shit.[189]

From this point on it seems as if Dartmouth and Sam are competing viciously to see which is more to blame for this pitiful mismatch of student and college. Dartmouth is hardly portrayed as a healthy academic environment. Sam's studies totally fail to excite or involve him. He is on an art scholarship, but his three courses for the first trimester are cultural anthropology, classical mythology and chemistry, a course choice undoubtedly dictated by the need to fulfill distribution requirements. The faculty is securely in the "old grey men" category, too enamoured of the academic research process to see any value in the life experience of a young Native man, and prone to being pompous and vengeful. The "buttoned up" Dean of Freshmen admonishes Sam to

"straighten up" his act[189] and puts him on social probation before he has attended his first class.[190] Sam, on the other hand, doesn't really give his studies the "old college try." He cuts classes, is late for others, and in one case involves a professor in an unfair confrontation on the subject of ritual tobacco usage. Sam has an equal lack of success in the social scene at Dartmouth. He prefers the company of his waitress/prostitute friend Judy to that of the girls from "good women's colleges" who visit Dartmouth and insults the one woman from Bennington who seems open to his company. While hardly unaccustomed to the effects of alcoholism and inappropriate behavior, Sam is turned off by the scenes of vomiting and public urination that he sees at fraternity parties and in his dorm. He is convinced that the students at Dartmouth are very "rough on people"[202] and sees evidence of their snobbery and elitism everywhere. To Dartmouth's credit, Sam's maladjustment is noted, and the administration sends a Navajo upperclassman, Vincent Begaye, to his room to talk with him. But, as was the case with Tom Joseph, a fellow Native student is not able to help. Like McBride, Vincent is lightyears from Sam in his ability to deal with the White dominated college culture. His idea of cheering Sam up is to bring him to a fraternity party, not a successful situation as noted above. Sam quickly decides that Vincent is "one of them."[202] Sam survives his first trimester, although he does get a D from his anthropology professor. However, the first time he gets access to a car, he drives home, and the reader is quite sure he will never return to Dartmouth. His final feelings are those of alienation and disdain for the

White college establishment where people have to "buy their knowledge at these here colleges"[193] because "...white men don't learn anything at home."[193] The reader concludes that indeed both Sam and Tom Joseph seem to have learned more "at home" than at college. Tom was accepted to Santa Barbara on a athletic scholarship, but we never read about his being involved in a single hour of sports at college. Likewise, we never read of Sam's taking an art course or doing any art work and that was the basis for his scholarship at Dartmouth.

Example 3: Tony Hillerman's First Eagle.

Both of Hillerman's principal crime solving characters, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, are college graduates. They both are enrolled Navajos and occupy important positions in law enforcement agencies thanks to their college degrees. In nearly all of his mysteries, Hillerman relates that both men search back in their minds from time to time trying to find valuable information which they learned in college which might help them solve the murders in which they are involved. They usually don't find much. What they do remember is described as "vague,"[90], and the image which Hillerman paints of higher education in First Eagle shows us why. The faculty who are supposed to be inspiring students are depicted as negligent members of a "good-old-boy network"[94]. The typical instructor, like Chee's biology professor, makes "no effort to hide his boredom with basic undergraduate courses nor his disdain for the ignorance of his students."[133]. Even Leaphorn's professor girlfriend admits that "Academics have to be boredom-invulnerable." Otherwise, they would have to go out and get "real jobs."[158] The

undergraduate curriculum is heavy on required courses, "dreaded" exams, and coursework which only reflects the narrow interests of the faculty. In his first semester at Arizona State, Joe Leaphorn may have learned that not all Whites look alike, but there is nowhere in any of the Hillerman novels reference to close friends made in college who are non-Native. In another novel, Chee recalls that most of the curiosity which the Native and non-Native students had for each other never progressed beyond the realm of sex. Rather than investing him with an openminded approach to diverse cultures, (and he was an anthropology major!) Leaphorn remembers that he returned from Arizona State "full of new-won college sophistication and cynicism"[50] which made it painful for him to accommodate those parts of his intellectual and spiritual being which continued to acknowledge his traditional beliefs. At best a college education seems to serve only as a meal ticket to a good job for Hillerman's policeman characters.

Example 4. Agoak by Yves Theriault

The final and by far the most disturbing literary example of the negative effects of higher education on a Native person is found in the novel Agoak by the Quebec writer Yves Theriault. Agoak is a young Inuit who is descended from the character Agaguk which is the title of Theriault's best known work and upon which the movie "Shadow of the Wolf" was based. Agoak was born in a relatively small Inuit community, but distinguished himself through his keen

intelligence and aptitude for conventional education. He took two study trips to Montreal and Toronto, completed a course in accounting and in data processing, set out for Frobisher Bay, now known as Iqaluit where he successfully landed a job in a bank. He then returns to this home town, marries his boyhood sweetheart, brings her to Frobisher and sets up a happy home there. Judith, the wife, finds a job as a waitress in the town. One night two drunken "rich White tourists" [105] follow her home from the restaurant, break into the house, and rape her since "She's only a native!"[94]. Agoak returns home just as the attack is taking place, kills the two Whites, and mutilates their bodies. Fearing that, as an Inuit, he would not receive justice at the hands of the White law establishment, Agoak steals a dog team and sled and flees with his wife across the frozen tundra. The second half of the novel depicts the disintegration of Agoak's personality and character as he and his wife struggle to survive in flight. He loses his ability to communicate effectively with his wife, turns to physically abusing her, murders a family of former friends whom they happen to encounter, kills two Mounties who find the couple, and finally, when his wife gives birth to a daughter, he kills the baby by smashing its head with his rifle butt. As this horrible saga unfolds, we follow the thinking of Judith, the wife, as she contemplates the role of Agoak's education in precipitating this awful tragedy. Judith progressively wonders how the "civilizing effect" of White education could be so quickly cast off by her husband. Next, she blames his

education for propelling him and them both into the foreign world of the Whites where they were prey to racial hatred, violence, and injustice. Finally, she wonders if the effect of his education was to strip him of a sense of humanity he might have found in his people's traditional culture leaving him with no White values and no indigenous ones, in short nothing but a savage, animalistic reflex of killing to survive. Thankfully, most Native college graduates do not experience this degree of moral collapse, but, like Agoak, many do find that once they have an education, they are not assured of "living happily ever after." Racial prejudice and cultural alienation can still haunt the lives of the best educated Native peoples putting them in precarious, sometimes painful, personal and professional situations. Furthermore, the price for successful employment based on education is often the loss of contact with one's traditional Native roots. As we see in the case of Janet Pete in the Hillerman series, this can cast a damaging cloud over one's whole life.

Drawing from statistical analysis as well as my twenty years of experience teaching and counseling Native American students, I know that it is safe to say that reality collates with the negative image of higher education in American Indian popular literature. Only 17% of Native people in the United States attempt a post-secondary education, and 75% of these leave before graduation.[Morris] 50% of Native students fail to complete their first year.[Wells, p. 87] Only 4% of American Indians graduate with a B.A. or

B.S. degree.[Morris] The primary reasons for this failure of our education system with Native people have been outlined in the novels discussed above: social maladjustment, disinterested faculty, irrelevant curriculum, lack of a support network, alienation from personal heritage, racism, etc. What to do? If we set aside the question of establishing tribal colleges, it is probably wise to attack the non-academic problems first. To overcome socialization problems, loneliness, and alienation colleges and universities might create Native residence halls, wings, or suites where American Indian students and others who are interested in Native heritage can form a community of support and education within the institution. Despite the examples of negative Native student interaction we have noted here, experience has shown that, rather than isolating them from the campus, Native residences give the students a secure sense of a home base. This sense of security encourages them to stay in school and permits them to venture forth into the college community as a whole. Hiring Native counselors and mandating them to facilitate positive peer communication and to organize tutoring programs can make Indian students' college years more positive. Often upperclass students have to be made aware of the need for giving support, perhaps through big brother/big sister type bonding, and this makes allies out of potential off-putting "big shots." Secondly, within the academic realm, encouraging the development of Native Studies programs, working to insert Indian components into exisiting courses, and organizing Native cultural events awakens the entire college community to

Native contributions to the mosiac of American culture. It also builds self-esteem among the Indian students.

The greatest contribution that the United States has made to the history of education is the undergraduate college/university experience. Of all American ethnic groups, Native peoples benefit from and participate in this opportunity the least. After taking so much from them, we are neglecting to find an effective way to give them back something that we have created which could be of value in their lives.

Works Consulted

Hillerman, Tony. The First Eagle. HarperCollins: New York, 1998.

Monture, Joel. Turtle Belly. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1998.

Morris, Linda. "Planning Strategies for Successful Student Transition." Proceedings, Retain '96. University of Arizona Press: Tucson, AZ: 1996. p. 27.

Owens, Louis. Wolfsong. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1995.

Theriault, Yves. Agoak. McGraw-Hill: Toronto, 1979.

Wells, Robert N., Jr. Native American Resurgence and Renewal. Scarecrow Press: Metuchen, NJ, 1994.